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ABSTRACT

The development and maintenance of romantic relationships in college students has been an increasingly frequent focus of attention among researchers interested in college student development. This study examined the role of gender in the relationships of emotional self-disclosure, self-esteem, and relationship satisfaction. Using a sample of college students (N=200) involved in serious dating relationships, it was expected both that higher levels of emotional self-disclosure would be found in female than male students, and that emotional self-disclosure would be more closely related to both self-esteem and relationship satisfaction in females than males. The subjects were administered measures of self-esteem, willingness to disclose emotions, and satisfaction with their relationship. Results supported the importance of affective self-disclosure in the relationship satisfaction reported by college students. Both male and female students involved in relationships of six months or more duration tended to report higher levels of relationship satisfaction in conjunction with higher levels of self-reported emotional self-disclosure. Self-esteem among women was related to relationship variables, both the level of emotional self-disclosure and the relationship satisfaction as reported by the individual student. Self-esteem was not related to these variables in the male sample. Further research should focus on clarifying both the nature and the direction of the relationships suggested, and on the differences between young men and young women in the correlates and antecedents of relationship quality and satisfaction. (LLL)

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Relationships of Self-Regard and Affective Self-Disclosure to Relationship Satisfaction in College Students

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Running Head: Relationship Satisfaction

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Abstract

Two hundred students involved in serious dating relationships were administered measures of self-esteem, willingness to disclose emotions, and satisfaction with their relationship. Results indicated that emotional self-disclosure was related to relationship satisfaction in both males and females. Additionally, self-esteem was related to emotional self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction in females though not in males.

Relationships of Self-Regard and Affective Self-Disclosure to Relationship Satisfaction in College Students

The development and maintenance of romantic relationships in college students has been an increasingly frequent focus of attention among researchers interested in college student development (Kaczmarek, Backlund, & Biemer, 1990; Lopez & Lent, 1991; Worth, Matthews, & Coleman, 1990). Not only is the development of nonfamilial intimacy one of the major developmental tasks of young adulthood (Erickson, 1968), but the success, versus failure, of a romantic relationship can adversely affect students' academic performance, life satisfaction, and mental health (Kaczmarek et al. 1991; Okun, Taub, & Witter, 1986). Some authors (e.g., Santrock, 1981) have even suggested that the loss of a romantic relationship may be a significant cause of suicide in young people. Thus, investigation of factors related to success versus failure in relationships constitutes an important focus of psychological research.

One major factor thought to be important in successful love relationships in general is the basic psychological health of the two partners (Hafner & Spence, 1988; Moffitt, Spence, & Goldney, 1986; Myhill & Lorr, 1988). Within this general approach, self-esteem has both theoretical and empirical connections to relationship endurance and satisfaction. For example, Maslow (1954) addressed the connection between self-esteem and love relationships in his theory of self-actualization. One characteristic of the self-actualized individual was that self-

esteem needs have been met, so the individual felt worthy of love, desirable, and secure in himself or herself. People who do not possess such self-esteem and self-respect would look to others for proof of their worth and value as a human being. This could have detrimental effects on the relationship quality.

Rogers (1951) postulated that people who truly begin to accept, respect, like, and love themselves are capable of experiencing these same attitudes toward others. Both Fromm (1934) and Horney (1937) reiterated this general theme and stated that self-love and love for others go hand in hand.

Empirical support for the relationship between self-esteem and relationship satisfaction has been reported by Barnett and Nietzel (1979) and Hendrick, Hendrick, and Adler (1988). For example, Barnett and Nietzel (1979) found that self-esteem was lower in eleven "distressed" versus eleven "non-distressed" married couples. They also reported that correlations between self-esteem and satisfaction were greater for wives than husbands. Although positive in findings, this study was limited by its small sample size (22 couples) and use of the Locke Wallace Marital Adjustment Test (Locke & Wallace, 1959) as a measure of satisfaction, instead of measuring satisfaction directly. Hendrick, Hendrick, and Adler (1988) reported that self-esteem was related to relationship satisfaction in men but not in women (contrary to the Barnett and Nietzel findings), but again measured satisfaction with an Adjustment scale (Spanier's 1976 Dyadic Adjustment Scale) and measured self-esteem with a two-item scale. In a related vein,

Lopez and Lent (1991) reported that college students' self-efficacy with respect to their own performance capabilities were related to their satisfaction in relationships.

Although suggestive then, research in this area is limited by the frequent use of small sample sizes, poorly conceptualized and/or operationalized (e.g., unreliable) variables (see Fincham and Bradbury, 1987; Norton, 1983), and the predominant focus on married couples versus non-married couples.

In addition to postulations of the important role of self-esteem, it may also be helpful to attempt to elucidate the underlying processes by which self-esteem leads to better relationships. In some of her earlier writings, Satir (1967) strongly emphasized the importance of self-esteem as it affected a number of relationship variables, one of which was the ability to communicate needs and feelings to one's partner. A person who possessed high self-esteem would recognize both his or her own as well as another's right to have feelings and opinions which differed. There would exist no need for the high self-esteem person to deny the direct expression of different feelings and opinions and communication would therefore be direct. This notion has been supported by Schumm, Figley, and Fuhs (1981), who found significant negative correlations between self-esteem and anxiety concerning self-disclosure.

In a related line of research, Waring (1988) and Waring & Reddon (1983) postulated that deficiencies in communication often lead to dissatisfaction with the relationship. His studies have

found that the ability to disclose to one's partner constituted a significant part of developing intimacy in general. Intimacy was found to be a significant predictor of relationship satisfaction. Thus, persons able to emotionally disclose to their partner were most likely to be in satisfactory relationships.

Waring and Chelune (1983) defined self-disclosure in terms of four dimensions: expression of emotion; expression of need; expression of thought, attitudes, beliefs, and fantasy; and self-awareness. The latter two were defined as "cognitive self-disclosure". The authors reported that cognitive self-disclosure was a significant determinant of rated levels of expressiveness, compatibility, identity, and intimate behavior. Jorgensen and Gaudy (1980) reported that self-disclosure was linearly related to relationship satisfaction, but satisfaction was defined as level of couple agreement on such issues as money management, sex, religion, etc. Although agreement on basic issues may be related to satisfaction, it is a conceptually different variable. Further, self-disclosure was assessed using a varied item set, including both information and feelings.

Lopez and Lent's (1991) measures of relationship self-efficacy, found to be related to satisfaction, included items assessing confidence in ability to engage in various communication and conflict-resolution skills.

Finally, Greene (1985) reported that fourteen couples who underwent communication skills training gained in self-esteem in comparison to a wait-control group. Hendrick (1981) reported that

both self-disclosure and self-esteem were related to marital satisfaction; women also scored higher than men on the measure of self-disclosure. Unfortunately, self-esteem was measured using one item, self-disclosure was assessed using willingness to talk about three areas (marriage and family, love and sex, emotions and feelings), and one index of satisfaction was yet another adjustment inventory (the Marriage Adjustment Inventory of Manson and Lerner, 1962), which uses a tally of "problem areas" as an index of satisfaction.

In postulating relationships of affective self-disclosure to self-esteem and relationship satisfaction, however, at least two gender-related issues must be considered. First, emotional self-disclosure can be considered a characteristic or skill more consistent with the traditional feminine vs. the traditional masculine role. For example, Spence and Helmreich (1978) summarized the positive aspects of traditional masculinity as "instrumental" traits and the positive aspects of traditional femininity as "expressive" traits--it is the latter constellation of traits which would include emotional expressiveness (i.e., self-disclosure). In other characterizations, Bakan (1966) summarized masculinity as "agency" and femininity as "communion" (thus foreshadowing Gilligan's 1982 description of women's tendency toward a relational orientation); again, emotional self-disclosure would seem to be consistent with the traditionally feminine or "communal" orientation. Not surprisingly, therefore, gender differences in emotional self-disclosure have been identified by

several researchers. Gerdes, Gehling, and Rapp (1981) found that females were more self-disclosing than males when asked to disclose to strangers, and did not find gender role orientation to be a moderating variable. However, given that the subjects were asked to disclose to strangers, the generalizability of such findings to non-stranger relationships (e.g., friendships, dating relationships) is questionable.

Snell, Miller, and Belk (1988) investigated the effects of personal characteristics of the disclosure recipient, as well as gender of the subjects. When the recipient was a male friend, all subjects reported similar patterns of willingness to disclose emotions. However, when the recipients were either female friends or spouses/lovers, female subjects were significantly more willing to discuss more "negative" emotions (e.g., depression, fear, anger) than were their male counterparts.

Snell, Belk, Flowers, and Warren (1988) found that on the topic of emotions (i.e., expressive behavior), women were more willing than men to self-disclose with both female and male friends. Snell, Miller, Belk, Garcia-Falconi, and Hernandez-Sanchez (1989) found that cultural background (i.e., ethnicity) was an additional moderator of emotional disclosure. Similar gender differences were found overall, but it was found that Mexican women had the highest degree of willingness to disclose emotions to male and female therapists. Mexican men were the least willing to disclose.

Related to the fact that emotional self-disclosure is more closely associated with traditional feminine gender role socialization is research suggesting that even in relationships, there are differences in how men and women interact (e.g., Tannen, 1990). Some authors suggest (e.g., Bly, 1990; Heesacker, 1991) that it is inappropriate to suggest that males are "deficient" in emotional expressiveness when it may be, in fact, that they prefer other modes of interaction. The present research is not based on assumptions that all men should be more emotionally expressive and, in fact, there are also many women who are disinclined toward emotional expressiveness (e.g., Snell et al., 1989).

Given these considerations, the relationships of emotional self-disclosure, self-esteem, and relationship satisfation and, especially, the role of gender as a potential moderator of those relationships is of interest in the present study. Using a sample of college students involved in serious dating relationships, it was expected both that higher levels of emotional self-disclosure would be found in female than male students and that emotional self-disclosure would be more closely related to both self-esteem and relationship satisfaction in females than males. The study was also designed to improve upon previous work in this area by providing direct definitions and operationalizations of the constructs of interest, and using two measures each of the two constructs (affective self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction) especially plagued by varied and heterogenous or indirect measurement in previous studies.

Method

Subjects and Procedures

Two hundred undergraduate students (100 female and 100 male) enrolled in an Introductory Psychology course served as subjects. Subjects were required to meet the following criteria of eligibility for the study: (a) they were currently involved in an exclusive dating relationship, and (b) had been involved with the current partner for at least six months. Subjects' participation in this particular study was voluntary and fulfilled part of a course requirement.

The subjects in the sample had a mean age of 19.0 years, with a standard deviation of 1.8 years and a range of 17 to 32 years, and 93% were between the ages of 18 and 20. All the subjects were unmarried and reported themselves to be in heterosexual relationships. Eighty-eight percent of the sample characterized themselves as being in dating relationships, 8% reported living with their partners, and 4% were engaged to marry their partners. The average length of the subjects' relationships was 19.4 months, with a standard deviation of 16.3 months.

Subjects were administered the instruments in groups of 25. Anonymity was assured, and the purposes of the study were explained to students following the completion of the study.

Instruments

Unconditional Self-regard Scale. The Unconditional Self-regard Scale (USRS) was chosen to operationalize the construct of

self-esteem. The USRS was developed by Betz, Serling, Wohlge[illegible], & Harshbarger (1991) to measure a person's enduring, global se[illegible] of self-esteem. This feeling can be positive or negative, and it reflects an inner evaluation of the self. The most important part of high self-esteem is unconditional self-regard, which is defined as a non-contingent valuing and acceptance of oneself. The 20 items are responded to on a 5-point Likert scale with values ranging from (1) strongly disagree to (5) strongly agree. Scores have a potential range of 20 to 100 with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-esteem. Of the 20 items assessing self-esteem, 11 are reverse-scored. In addition, 10 filler items are interspersed throughout to disguise the purpose of the instrument. The internal consistency reliability coefficient was found to be .90, and the USRS correlates highly with other measures of self-esteem, supporting its concurrent validity (Betz et al., 1991). Its content validity was supported in that it was found to be positively related to lower anxiety and higher mental health scores (Betz et al., 1991). Internal consistency reliability (coefficient alpha) in the present sample was .89.

Emotional Self-Disclosure Scale. The type of self-disclosure of interest was verbal self-disclosure of emotion, defined as the direct, verbal communication of affective states to one's intimate partner. The Emotional Self-Disclosure Scale (ESDS) is a forty-item measure developed by Snell, Miller, and Belk (1988) to assess emotional self-disclosure. Items were written to measure eight distinct emotions: depression, happiness, jealousy, anxiety,

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anger, calmness, apathy, and fear. For each of the 40 items on this inventory, the subjects indicated how willing they would be to discuss that topic with spouses/lovers. The wording of the "target" individual was changed to "partner" for adaptation to a non-married population. A 5-point Likert scale was used in the responses, with the following anchors: (1) not at all willing to discuss this topic and (5) totally willing to discuss this topic. Higher total scores corresponded to a greater willingness to discuss the relevant emotion with the partner. The internal consistency reliability of the ESDS for partner targets ranged from .86 to .95. A 12-week period was used to obtain test-retest reliability for partner targets and ranged from .58 to .75. Validity data include predicted relationships between willingness to disclose and the restrictive emotionality aspect of the masculine role (Snell et al., 1989) and support for theoretically postulated gender and cultural differences (with females, especially Mexican females reporting most disclosure; Snell et al., 1989). The value of coefficient alpha in this sample was .96.

Affective Self-Disclosure Scale for Couples. The Affective Self-Disclosure Scale for Couples (ASDS) was constructed by Davidson, Balswick, and Halverson (1983) to measure the frequency of emotional self-disclosure to partners. The wording of the items was adapted herein for a non-married population. Individuals were asked to rate 16 different emotions according to their frequency of disclosure. Responses ranged from (1) never to (4) very often. Individual item scores were summed to produce a total score for

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affective self-disclosure. Internal consistency reliability in this sample was .92. Validity data include a largely predictive series of negative relationships between discrepancies in "given vs. "received" disclosure and relationship satisfaction (Davidson et al., 1983).

Relationship Assessment Scale. Relationship satisfaction was viewed as an overall, subjective, non-behaviorally oriented evaluation of the relationship, indicating the extent to which one partner is satisfied or happy with his/her partner. The Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS) was designed by Hendrick (1988) to measure an individual's satisfaction with his or her relationship. Narrative data were obtained from 125 subjects who reported themselves to be "in love". Analyses suggested a unifactorial scale structure and moderate intercorrelations among the items. The internal consistency reliability coefficient for the scale was .86, and concurrent validity evidence included a .80 correlation with the Dyadic Adjustment Scale (Spanier, 1976). The scale was effective in discriminating couples who stayed together from those whose relationship ended (Hendrick, 1988). The RAS includes seven items scored on a 5-point Likert scale with (1) representing low satisfaction and (5) representing high satisfaction. The range for total scores is 7 to 35 and higher overall scores are indicative of greater relationship satisfaction. Reliability (coefficient alpha) in this sample was .89.

Quality Marriage Index. The Quality Marriage Index (QMI) is a six-item index designed by Norton (1983) to assess a

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relationship's overall, global quality, as perceived of one of the members. Fincham and Bradbury (1987) provide extensive evidence for defining this construct as a subjective, idiosyncratic evaluation rather than a self-report of specific behaviors. Couples seeking therapy may or may not differ in reported behavior, yet their satisfaction can be assessed by a common measure of overall happiness with the relationship. The QMI is an index that uses a 7-point Likert scale to represent (1) strong disagreement with an item through (7) strong agreement with an item. The sixth item is responded to by indicating how happy one is with the relationship on a 10-point scale, where 10 indicates perfect happiness and 1 denotes unhappiness, and 5 represents, in the respondent's opinion, the degree of happiness most people enjoy. Norms for the QMI were derived from a sample of 430 people living in four different states. The wording was adapted as necessary for use with a non-married sample, and reliability in this sample was .95. Findings that happier marriages were related to greater similarity of attitudes, to less frequent discussions of ending the relationship, and to ratings of probability of being together in five years provided evidence for the scales' validity (Norton, 1983).

Finally, subjects were asked to indicate their gender, their partner's gender, the age of the participant and partner, the length of the relationship, and the status of the relationship: dating, living together, engaged, or married.

Analysis of Data

Gender differences in self-regard, self-disclosure, and relationship satisfaction were examined using t-tests. Correlations among all variables were computed, both for the total group and separately for men and women. The predictive utility of self-regard, self-disclosure (both the ESDS and the ASDS), subject age, partner age, and length of relationship was examined using stepwise multiple regression analyses; separate analyses utilized the Relationship Assessment Scale and Quality Marriage Index as dependent variables. Equations were calculated separately for males and females.

Results

Table 1 shows gender differences in self-regard, self-disclosure, and relationship satisfaction in the college student sample. As shown in the table, female students reported significantly higher levels of emotional self-disclosure on both scales in comparison to male students. No differences in self-esteem or relationship satisfaction were reported in the sample.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Table 2 provides the correlations among the variables: correlations are provided separately for men and women. Measures of the same construct were highly correlated. The self-disclosure scales were related at the level of .73 in males and .64 in

females, and the correlations between relationship satisfaction scales were .72 in females and .63 in males. All of these correlations were statistically significant at the .001 level.

Self-disclosure was significantly related to relationship satisfaction in both males and females and as measured by both self-disclosure scales and both relationship satisfaction scales. Relationships of self-disclosure to relationship satisfaction ranged from .33 (emotional self-disclosure and relationship assessment scale in females) to .50, the relationship of the affective self-disclosure scale to the RAS in males. Finally, self-regard was related to both self-disclosure and to relationship satisfaction in females but was not related to either of those variables in males. More specifically, the correlations among these variables were statistically significant within the female sample but not in the male sample.

INSERT TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE

Table 3 shows the significant predictors of relationship satisfaction of those assessed. As shown in the table, affective self-disclosure was the strongest predictor of relationship satisfaction both for the total group and within the male and female samples and regardless of the method of measurement of the dependent variable, that is, relationship satisfaction. In addition, unconditional self-regard was incrementally related to

relationship satisfaction among women and, consequently, among the total group of subjects, although the significance of unconditional self-regard as a predictor occurred only when relationship satisfaction was measured by the RAS.

Discussion

The results of the present study strongly support the importance of affective self-disclosure in the relationship satisfaction reported by college students. Both male and female students involved in relationships of six months or more duration tended to report higher levels of relationship satisfaction in conjunction with higher levels of self-reported emotional self-disclosure. For a single variable, emotional self-disclosure accounted for moderate proportions of variance in relationship satisfaction. For the men, these percentages were 25% and 13% for the RAS and QMI, respectively. For the women, these values were 17% and 19%, respectively.

Although accounting for moderate proportions of variance, these data were not derived from a causal experimental design and, thus, alternative causal hypotheses should be explored. It is possible that the more satisfied an individual is with his/her relationship, the easier it is for him/her to self-disclose emotions. Both satisfaction and disclosure may be derived from other variables, for example, trust. In addition, there may be interactional styles more often associated with traditional masculinity that are also related to relationship satisfaction. Further research directed toward all three of these possibilities

is needed.

In addition to the findings of a relationship between affective self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction, self-esteem among women was related to relationship variables, both the level of emotional self-disclosure and the relationship satisfaction as reported by the individual student. Self-esteem was not related to these variables in the male sample.

Although further work is needed to understand interactional patterns facilitative of satisfaction in relationships and, especially, gender differences and similarities in the processes involved, this study did find a moderate degree of relationship between emotional self-disclosure and relationship satisfaction in colege student dating couples. For couples having problems, assistance in learning self-disclosure skills may be called for. For example, Waring (1988) has developed a specific technique to enhance intimacy through what he termed "cognitive self-disclosure". This type of self-disclosure involves the verbal expression of emotion and can be taught systematically. Greene (1985) studied a similar training program, the Relationship Enhancement Program, and found significant improvements in partners' self-esteem and relationship satisfaction. These suggestions echo that of Lopez and Lent (1991), who recommended "cognitively based strategies aimed at furthering students' interpersonal competence" (p. 228).

Alternatively, counselors may wish to explore with their clients perceptions of the relationship which make emotional self-

disclosure threatening and/or to acknowledge that some clients, male or female, may prefer to avoid emotional self-disclosure. Although this may prove problematic for partners who value emotional intimacy of this sort, respect for individual difference in stylistic preferences must be maintained.

The relationship between self-esteem and emotional self-disclosure among women may also have implications for counseling. If self-esteem is related to a woman's ability to self-disclose emotionally, this may also then be a focus of counseling.

Further research should focus on clarifying both the nature and the direction of the relationships suggested herein, and on the differences between young men and young women in the correlates and antecedents of relationship quality and satisfaction. It would not be surprising if different factors are related to functioning. Additionally, the fact that all subjects stated that they were in heterosexual relationships limits the generalizability of the results. Future research should include individuals in same-sex relationships in an effort to test whether patterns of self-disclosure and satisfaction operate similarly. Given that the college years are an important time both for self-concept crystallization and for the development of intimate nonfamilial relationships, further understanding of how these are related to each other would be useful both theoretically and practically.

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Table 1

Gender Differences in Self-Regard, Self-Disclosure, and Relationship Satisfaction

Variable	Men (n=100)		Women (n=100)		t-value
	M	SD	M	SD	
Self-esteem (Unconditional Self-Regard Scale)	70.4	11.5	68.4	13.2	1.14
Self-Disclosure					
Emotional Self-Disclosure Scale	145.9	25.0	162.8	26.2	-4.68**
Affective Self-Disclosure Scale	49.6	8.1	54.0	8.0	-3.88**
Relationship Satisfaction					
Relationship Assessment Scale	28.3	4.9	28.8	6.1	-.64
Quality Marriage Index	37.0	7.1	36.3	7.7	.66

**$p < .001$

Table 2

Relationships Among Variables in College Women and Men

	Pearson product moment *r*				
	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. Unconditional Self-Regard Scale	---	.26**	.28**	.34***	.19*
2. Emotional Self-Disclosure Scale	.12	---	.64***	.33***	.34***
3. Affective Self-Disclosure Scale	.09	.73**	---	.42***	.43***
4. Relationship Assessment Scale	.17	.37***	.50***	---	.72***
5. Quality Marriage Index	.14	.35***	.37***	.63***	---

Note: Correlations above the diagonal are those for women, and those below the diagonal are those for men.

*$p < .05$ **$p < .01$ ***$p < .001$

Table 3

Significant Predictors of Relationship Satisfaction in College Students

Variable	R	R-squared	Betz	F-value
	All subjects: Relationship Assessment Scale (RAS)			
Affective Self-Disclosure	.45	.20	.41	49.24*
Self-Regard	.49	.24	.20	30.59*
	All subjects: Quality Marriage Index			
Affective Self-Disclosure	.42	.17	.35	20.66*
Unconditional Self-Regard	.48	.23	.24	14.38*
	Women: Quality Marriage Index			
Affective Self-Disclosure	.43	.19	.43	22.36*
	Men: Relationship Assessment Scale			
Affective Self-Disclosure	.50	.25	.40	32.47*
	Men: Quality Marriage Index			
Affective Self-Disclosure	.37	.13	.37	15.25*

Note: The complete predictor set included subject age, partner age, length of relationship, self-esteem, emotional self-disclosure, and affective self-disclosure.

*$p < .001$